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SUBJECT: CHHATTISGARH ELECTIONS: BJP CONFIDENT OF FORMING  
GOVERNMENT, CONGRESS SAYS ARITHMETIC IS ON ITS SIDE

REF: A. A 240

[B. B 325](#)

[C. C 326](#)

[D. D 531](#)

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The Indian state of Chhattisgarh went to the polls on November 14 and 20. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made wholesale changes to its roster, throwing out a majority of its sitting legislators to avoid anti-incumbency. It has high-lighted its anti-Maoist security policies and offered rice at give away prices to its poorest citizens. The Congress hopes to gain from anti-incumbency and concern about corruption, and aims to woo back tribal voters from the BJP. The central and state government provided extensive security for the polls, especially in Maoist-affected areas, and voter turn-out appears to be high. Congress leaders agreed that the BJP is in a strong position, but hopes to make gains from the 2003 polls. However, the BJP has only a four seat majority going into the elections, and the loss of a few seats could bring a Congress-led coalition to power. The Mumbai terrorist attacks, which occurred after the end of voting, will not be a factor in these polls. End Summary

CHHATTISGARH VOTING COMPLETED

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Chhattisgarh went to the polls in two phases, November 14 and 20 (Ref D). On November 14, polls were held in the 12 districts most affected by the Maoist insurgency in the state, and the central and state government provided extensive security. Polls were held in the rest of the state on November [1](#)20. The Election Commission will announce the results on December 8. In the outgoing state assembly of 90 seats in Chhattisgarh, the BJP holds 50 seats, the Congress 37, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) 1, and the Bahujan Samaj Party [1](#)1. (One seat is vacant.) Chhattisgarh has a significant scheduled caste (SC/Dalit) and tribal (ST) population, and large numbers of assembly seats are reserved for these disadvantaged communities. Thirty-nine of Chhattisgarh's 90 seats are reserved for SC/ST candidates (SC - 10, ST - 29). As elsewhere, the main electoral issues in the state are development, security, and anti-incumbency, though Chhattisgarh's faces these challenges in unique ways.

¶3. (U) In India, the simple explanation for all voter behavior is "anti-incumbency." When governments lose power, it is ascribed to anti-incumbency; when governments maintain power, they are said to have overcome anti-incumbency. Since governments so routinely disappoint voters in India, this analysis has served pundits well. Though people of both parties respect Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh, observers believe that anti-incumbency sentiments will be high; his administration has been frequently criticized for corruption and poor governance. A Congress leader from Gujarat who was campaigning for his party in Chhattisgarh told Congenoffs, "All the anti-government votes will gravitate to the Congress Party. Our internal calculations show that both BJP and Congress will get 40 seats each comfortably and the ten remaining seats will be so thinly won or lost, that whichever party comes to power would hold a wafer-thin majority." According to Ejaz Kaiser, Raipur Bureau Chief for the Hindustan Times, an important election issue for voters is their desire to see an end to the Maoist violence in the southern part of the state, which has increased dramatically since 2005.

ANTIDOTE FOR ANTI-INCUMBENCY?

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¶4. (SBU) Recognizing the risk of anti-incumbency, the BJP replaced 42 of its 50 sitting assembly members with new candidates for the elections. Gujarat CM Narendra Modi had taken the same step with success in the December 2007 elections in that state. Only 46 seats are needed to hold power in Chhattisgarh. Since control of the legislature could be

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reversed by the loss or gain of just a few seats, the BJP is hoping this move will pay off. Some interlocutors, however, predict that if the Congress and third parties gain a handful of seats, it could explore the possibility of a coalition government. Kaiser predicted that successful third-party candidates would more likely align themselves with a Congress-led coalition, than with the BJP.

POLLSTERS PREDICT BJP WITH LEAD

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¶5. (U) With only 46 needed for a majority, "The Week-C-Voter" pre-poll survey shows both major parties close to that razor thin margin, but gives a slight to the BJP (44 - 52 seats) over the Congress (38 - 46 seats). In contrast, a Nielsen-Star News poll predicts the BJP gaining both vote share and seats, resulting in a convincing majority, growing from 50 seats to a solid 55 seats. Polls in India, though, are notoriously unreliable.

CHEAP RICE WILL BRING HOME THE BACON

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¶6. (U) In order to solidify a win, the BJP kicked off what the media are calling "rice wars." Four days ahead of the first

phase of polling, on November 10, the ruling BJP released its election manifesto, including sharp cuts in the price of rice. The BJP had been offering rice at 6 cents a kilo to the poorest of the poor for the past two years, which, according to observers, contributed to BJP victories in two assembly by-elections. Not to be outdone, the Congress, offered rice at 4 cents per kilo to the poorest in its election manifesto. In response, the BJP promised rice at 2 cents per kilo to the poorest of the poor, and at 4 cents per kilo to people just below the poverty line. (Note: Offering rice at below market costs also enables the government to offload excess rice accumulated over the past 8 to 10 years as a result of price supports for farmers that created excess rice production. End Note.) Chief Minister Singh explained the politics and the economics simply: "For Rs. 3 billion (\$60 million) more annually, I can ensure that not a single person goes to bed hungry in my state." This is an appealing strategy in a state with many who struggle to feed their families.

#### SALWA JUDUM AND THE NAXALITES: POLITICAL HOT POTATO

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17. (SBU) With an increase in Maoist related violence in the southern part of the state since 2005, security and the government-sponsored Salwa Judum movement are also a major issues. The Salwa Judum movement has been controversial inside and outside Chhattisgarh. The movement, which started as a largely tribal people's movement to oppose Maoist insurgents (known locally as Naxalites) in Chhattisgarh, was met with violence from the Maoists, driving - or forcing - villagers into Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps. Though still called Salwa Judum, the term now refers to a loose organization of tribal villagers, armed by the state to assist in anti-Maoist paramilitary operations (Refs A, B, C). There are now roughly 40,000 villagers living in IDP camps in southern Chhattisgarh. According to Kaiser, candidates have largely avoided talking about the Maoist problem, but have expressed differing views on the Salwa Judum. The movement was initiated by senior Congress politician Mahendra Karma as a way to peacefully counter the Maoist influence in tribal villages, but once these efforts turned violent, and villagers fled to the IDP camps, Chief Minister Singh of the BJP and the state security forces armed some of the villagers, with the support of Karma. CM Singh has

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vowed that Salwa Judum will continue to operate. Ajit Jogi, the former CM and the un-anointed Congress challenger, promised in his election speeches that a Congress government would disband the Salwa Judum. However, Karma and other Congress leaders from the Maoist-affected areas of south Chhattisgarh continue to express support for Salwa Judum, in some form.

#### STRONG VOTER TURNOUT DESPITE MAOIST THREATS

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18. (U) State and national security forces provided extensive security for the polls in southern Chhattisgarh. Voter turnout throughout the state was high, even in Maoist-affected areas.

Though Maoists threatened to "cut-off the hands of people who dared to vote," voter turnout was as high as 55 percent in the worst impacted areas, according to press estimates. (According to official figures, 70.53 percent of eligible voters turned out across the districts in the first phase of voting, an estimated 6.4 million people. In 2003, when violence was less of an issue, voter turn-out was reportedly 70 percent as well.)

¶9. (U) Nevertheless, campaigning by both the major parties was subdued in the 12 Maoist-affected constituencies (out of a total 90 for the state), and there was some violence, though less than in the 2003 elections. Two security personnel died in Maoist attacks, down from five in the last election. Far fewer polling stations were disrupted and electronic voting machines looted than last time. Maoists attacked seventeen polling places, but the election commission quickly re-established voting. Twelve Salwa Judum associates contested the polls, some as independents and some as BJP candidates. Voters clearly demonstrated their refusal to be held hostage by the Maoists, though it is difficult to gauge public opinion about the government attempts to eliminate the Maoist threat, as well as the Salwa Judum.

¶10. (SBU) Tribal areas in most parts of the country have traditionally voted for Congress candidates. The Congress Party in Chhattisgarh has also historically nurtured tribal candidates, who have helped the party develop strong vote banks in these poor, rural areas. In 2003, however, tribal voters in the state cast their ballots for the BJP in large numbers, helping the BJP come to power. The BJP expects tribal voters to do the same this time; on the evening of the first round of polling, CM Singh confided to one of his staff, "My government is coming back."

¶11. (SBU) Comment: The voting in Chhattisgarh was completed before the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 26, so this tragedy will not be a factor in these elections. The BJP believes that it will come back to power with a comfortable majority, while the Congress hopes to gain enough seats to allow it to form a government, perhaps in a coalition with third parties. As one of India's most remote and poorest states, gauging public sentiment is difficult. The government's efforts to ensure that its citizens were able to cast their ballot, despite security threats and poor infrastructure, is admirable.  
End Comment.  
FOLMSBEE